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ABSTRACT

A consortium effort sponsored by the Northwest Regional Evaluation Association has arrived at a workable definition of a portfolio that takes into account the viewpoints of teachers and those interested in large-scale assessment. The modified definition states that: "A student portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of the student's efforts, progress or achievement in (a) given area(s). This collection must include: guidelines for selecting content; criteria for judging merit; student participation in selecting content; and evidence of student self-reflection." In portfolio use, it is essential to specify the purpose of the portfolio and to place priority on instruction. The requirement for clear and consistent performance criteria is a necessity to keep students from having to guess. It is clear criteria that make the portfolio an effective assessment tool. There are four references. (SLD)

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Portfolios in Practice: What Is A Portfolio?

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Teachers are drawn to portfolios because they can be good instructional tools--promoting development and application of criteria, self-reflection, attention to audience, responsibility for learning, etc. Assessment folks are drawn to portfolios because they offer the possibility of "authentic" assessment--multiple samples of student work generated in realistic contexts.

As a participant and observer of many discussions between teachers and large-scale assessment people, it seems that assessment people do not recognize the essential nature of having a portfolio system be viewed by teachers as an instructional tool; and teachers do not see the instruction potential of using portfolios as assessment devices. This all became apparent over a period of two and one-half years, during a series of conversations between educators in various roles, all with an interest in exploring the topic of portfolios. This consortium effort, sponsored by the Northwest Evaluation Association, is now in its third year.

One result of these discussions is a workable definition of a portfolio that seems to take all viewpoints into account. The following is a slight modification of the definition developed by the consortium:

> **A student portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of the student's efforts, progress or achievement in (a) given area(s). This collection must include:**
>
> - **guidelines for selecting content;**
> - **criteria for judging merit;**
> - **student participation in selecting content; and**
> - **evidence of student self-reflection.**

The Need To Specify Purpose

During discussions in the consortium, it often became apparent that people were talking "past" each other; what was being said about portfolios was so different that it was difficult to understand another person's point of view. I feel that this was because participants made different, unstated, assumptions about the basic purpose for portfolios. The purpose will affect all the other decisions made about the portfolio

system design. For example, many teachers use portfolios to "celebrate" student accomplishment. This is a very personal use in which the major audience is the student him or herself. This will have very different implications for criteria, content specifications and self-selection/reflection than, for example, if the purpose is large scale assessment. So, it is easy to see why many teachers were taken aback by assessor's statements that appeared to them as "reducing the portfolio to numbers." Purpose in a portfolio is everything; purposes have to be agreed upon before any other decisions can occur.

The Need For Priority To Be On Instruction

Assembling portfolios that truly tell a story can be very time consuming; and a task that most likely will fall to teachers and their students. If teachers and students do not see the instructional benefit of this effort, the validity of portfolio content will especially be suspect. Portfolios are instructional for students only when students take responsibility for assembling them. The requirements in the definition for student self-reflection and self-selection promote the instructional aims of portfolios.

> "By encouraging students to engage in self and peer evaluation teachers empower students to take control of their own learning. When students help determine the criteria for assessment they can make reasonable decisions about the quality of their own work. By engaging students in self-assessments students learn they are ultimately responsible for their own learning. It is in this area that portfolios are so powerful." (Tierney et al., 1991, p. 59)

> "To be successful, students must learn how to evaluate rather than how to be evaluated....Evaluation is routine, something to be done at every step of the way as they examine decisions, observations, data, ideas and outcomes....(When) evaluation is a key process and one over which students have considerable control, they are truly critical thinkers." (Penick, 1989)

The Need For Clear Criteria

The requirement for clear and consistent performance criteria is the part of the definition that teachers see as amounting to reducing a rich demonstration of student work to numbers. However, clear criteria are also essential for instruction. I assert that all judgments are based on criteria, whether or not we can articulate them in a clear

fashion. If this is true, then the criteria that teachers use to make judgments about students, and the criteria students use to self-reflect and select items for their portfolios can either be left unexamined (and dependent on how good students are at figuring them out on their own), or can be publicly explored in an effort to promote shared understanding of the important characteristics and dimensions of a task. We can either be crystal clear about criteria or we can make students guess.

> "All higher-order and performance-based assessments require the use of judgment; there's no way around it. Is it possible to employ that judgment in a way that is fair and clear to students, that does not leave teachers vulnerable to charges of arbitrariness, and that provides meaningful information to outsiders?...Such assessment requires...taking the time to be clear and public about criteria." (Wiggins, 1988)

> "The dialogue that is happening among teachers is one of the most exciting things happening from this. Portfolios may actually bring us together more than ever before so we begin to define our criteria much more precisely." (Sugarman, 1989)

Definition Reprise

The definition developed by the consortium was designed to promote flexibility while at the same time add essential features that make it useful for both instruction and assessment. Criteria, self-selection and self-reflection make portfolios instructional. Clear performance criteria make it assessment.

Examples of Portfolio Projects

Many participants in the consortium are actively involved in portfolio projects. Most use the above definition as an organizing tool for decision making. The next two presenters will provide an overview of four portfolio projects in which they have been personally involved. These four projects represent four different purposes--classroom instruction at the secondary level, placement of students into college English classes, tracking progress of primary students, and evaluation of instruction. The presenters will describe how these purposes played out in terms of criteria, guidelines for selection (portfolio content), student self-reflection and self-selection, development process, and what worked.

References

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